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Confronting the Iraq Challenge

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Mr. Speaker, we face a critical challenge in Iraq with no certain outcome. While those in the White House and the Majority may want to use this debate as an opportunity to gloss over the situation and cast aspersions at their opponents, now is the time for a serious and sustained conversation within our government and among the American people about how we can end the occupation and do so in a way that maximizes Iraq's chances to govern and defend itself.

A brief survey of the status of our operations confirms the gravity of our position.

First, consider our strategic interests in the conflict. The Administration's entire case for invading Iraq has proven false. The President's claims about nuclear weapons, chemical weapons, biological weapons, links to terrorism, an imminent threat – they were all wrong. CIA weapons inspectors followed every plausible lead to find weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, and came up empty. We might have known the outcome of this search had we showed more patience with international weapons inspections before the President launched the invasion. We have also confirmed what many of us suspected at the time, that the alleged links between Saddam Hussein and Al Qaeda terrorists were fabricated and false. In fact, with the CIA now calling Iraq the world's number one terrorist training ground, we have ironically created a problem that did not exist when we set out to solve it. And we diverted attention and assets from Afghanistan, which truly was ground zero in the anti-terrorist offensive.

Indeed, we have engaged in a war of choice that has actually made our nation less safe. Congress has poured over \$400 billion into Iraq that was entrusted to us by American taxpayers, dealing a serious blow both to our economy and to the many critical domestic programs that have been cut, essentially to help pay for the war effort. We have overextended our military, damaging recruiting and retention efforts and leaving our military units undermanned, underequipped, and exhausted from repeated deployments.

We have created a terrorist breeding ground in Iraq that may threaten our security for years to come. And, by fueling tensions both between sectarian groups inside Iraq and between Iraq and its neighbors, like Iran, Syria, and Turkey, this war has stirred up a dangerous hornet's nest that could lead to significant regional conflict. In short, our national security is at far greater risk now than three years ago when the war began.

Despite these shortcomings, the new "unity government" led by Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki represents some progress in our political efforts, produced by the successful conduct of a handful of elections, a constitutional referendum, and sustained negotiations between major Shi'a, Sunni, and Kurdish political parties. These successes are the most positive story we have to tell in Iraq. If Iraq's leaders choose to work together to unite their nation and prevent sectarian agendas from tearing the Iraqi people apart, there will be hope for achieving stability and democracy in that country.

Unfortunately, Iraqi leaders have not yet made clear what their choice will be. They have not yet shown the unity of purpose and political courage that will be necessary to hold their country together after the U.S. departs. They have not yet proven that they can set aside their sectarian agendas. Most importantly, they still must prove that they have the power to reach out beyond the green zone to influence Iraqi citizens and lead them toward unity and peace. Here, especially, the jury is still out on the extent of progress.

U.S. taxpayers have spent \$20 billion on reconstruction projects, but have only limited concrete results to show for their investment. Tens of millions of dollars were irresponsibly squandered through poor management and questionable contracts with companies like Halliburton. The Coalition Provisional Authority was unable to account for the use of nearly \$9 *billion* in U.S. and Iraqi reconstruction funds. According to conservative estimates, up to a quarter of reconstruction funding has been diverted away from reconstruction activities to pay for associated security costs. Furthermore, much of the reconstruction work that has been carried out has been ineffective. In an October 2005 audit of over \$250 million in water and sanitation projects, the Government Accountability Office (GAO) found that over one-quarter of the projects were "inoperable or were operating at lower than normal capacity."

The results of this mismanagement are striking. Over half of all Iraqi households still lack access to clean water, and 85 percent lack reliable electricity. Oil production remains well below pre-invasion levels. A quarter of Iraqi children suffer from chronic malnutrition. More than a quarter of Iraqis – possibly up to forty percent – remain unemployed. By any standard, the reconstruction effort has fallen disastrously short.

Unfortunately, the Bush Administration appears to have learned the wrong lesson from these reconstruction failures, proposing no additional funding to rebuild Iraq and support the civilian population. Without additional funding, our reconstruction efforts will come to an end even though we remain far short of our goals. The Special Inspector General for Iraq Reconstruction (SIGIR) has reported that more than two-thirds of planned health care centers, over 60 percent of planned water sector projects, and a third of planned electricity projects will not be completed due to lack of funds. The answer is

not to give up on Iraq reconstruction altogether, but to find effective ways to make reconstruction projects work.

On the security front, some limited progress has been made. According to the State Department's most recent weekly update, approximately 265,000 Iraqi troops have enlisted to secure and defend their homeland. In addition, American forces recently scored an important victory by killing the number one terrorist leader in Iraq, Abu Musab al Zarqawi.

As Iraqi troops have stood up, however, American troops have not been able to stand down, despite promises to the contrary. The sheer number of Iraqi enlistees has neither translated into capability for independent operations nor improved the security situation. In fact, Iraq is more violent, more dangerous, and more divided than at any time since the war began.

The security situation is increasingly complex. Instead of fighting one battle, we are fighting at least three: against largely Sunni insurgents who are fighting to recapture the power they enjoyed under Saddam Hussein; against growing sectarian violence; and against terrorists, some foreign-born, united under a banner of Islamic fundamentalism. Above all, we are fighting to prevent full-fledged civil war, and the outcome remains uncertain. The death of Zarqawi will help in our battle against the fundamentalist terrorists, but it will not markedly change the larger challenge we face in pacifying Sunni and Shiite extremists.

This picture is not pretty, and it is not a picture the Administration has been willing to discuss frankly. But it is the reality. Crafting an effective Iraq strategy means facing this reality head-on. Unfortunately, the Administration has adamantly refused to do so. In fact, Middle East expert Anthony Cordesman of the Center for Strategic and International Studies called the Administration's most recent report on progress in Iraq, "both dishonest and incompetent." Cordesman noted, "the American people and the US Congress need an honest portrayal of what is happening, not lies by omission and 'spin.'"

Most Americans now understand that this Administration has relied on spin and misinformation to carry out its Iraq policy from Day One. It led our nation into war based on false claims and insinuations. It misled the American public about the likely costs and duration of our operations. It has attempted to discredit critics of its post-invasion operation, including former military officials. And it has consistently refused to level with the American people about the significant obstacles we continue to face.

The real question before us – the question most Americans are asking – is how long must our troops stay in Iraq?

The President has told us that, as Iraqi troops stand up, American troops can stand down. But that formula is backwards. Iraqi troops will not truly stand up until American troops begin standing down. Iraqi leaders will not make the necessary compromises and

take charge of their own destiny until they know their dependence on American forces is coming to an end. As we stand down, they will have no choice but to stand up.

While our military's valiant efforts have clearly facilitated important steps forward, including the formation of a democratically elected government, the troubling reality is that our continued presence makes success more elusive. It serves as a disincentive for Iraqi military and political leaders to take courageous risks to stabilize their country and assume responsibility for their government. Equally importantly, our presence is a magnet for international terrorists and an incitement for the insurgency. While the Administration argues that we must stay the course to help Iraqis accomplish key objectives, our very presence is actually detracting from progress toward those objectives. In order to jump-start progress, our troops must begin to come home.

How we leave does matter. We must leave in a way that maximizes Iraq's chances to govern and defend itself. At the same time, we cannot become hostages to the failures of Administration policy, prolonging our stay in a situation where our very presence is a continuing provocation. That is why I joined with Rep. Brad Miller last fall in introducing H. J. Res. 70, which would require the President to deliver the exit strategy that the troops and the American people deserve. Today, I am renewing that call.

Let me explain in clear terms what a responsible exit strategy means:

We need to hear that the President has a plan for reducing our presence in Iraq within a reasonable timeframe. "As they stand up, we will stand down" isn't a strategy; it is a slogan. A responsible exit strategy would set out, in clear and realistic terms, a plan to guide our troops through their departure from Iraq and a strategy for reducing our military commitment. We must be willing to adapt to changing conditions, but a responsible exit strategy must not hold our troops hostage to the Iraqi people's ability to resolve their own differences.

We need to hear that such a plan would begin with an initial, near-term drawdown of U.S. forces. The Administration has repeatedly hinted that a significant drawdown may be imminent, but has quietly backed away from such predictions over and over again. A near-term, initial drawdown of forces would send a message to Iraqis that we have no permanent designs on their country, that our presence is coming to an end, and that they need to step forward to take the reins of responsibility.

We also need to hear a pledge from the President that we will not establish long-term bases on Iraqi soil. When I questioned General John Abizaid, commander of U.S. Central Command, in a recent subcommittee hearing, he refused to make a commitment not to establish permanent bases. In the wake of that exchange, the House has voted twice to force such a commitment. A House-passed amendment to the fiscal year 2006 supplemental appropriations bill to prohibit permanent U.S. bases in Iraq was removed from the final version of the bill by the Republican congressional leadership. The House recently passed a similar provision as part of the fiscal year 2007 Defense Appropriations bill, but it is unclear if it will survive in the final version of the bill. The President must

heed Congress's message and send a clear signal that the U.S. has no long-term military designs in Iraq.

In addition, we need to hear that there is a plan to continue to support Iraq when our troops depart. Such a plan would mean ongoing U.S. assistance for the Iraqi government as it crafts policies to facilitate unity, security, and prosperity. This support will be particularly critical as Iraq revisits its constitution later this year. It also means support for the development of Iraqi institutions like its parliament, its judiciary, and its security forces.

Such a plan would also involve increased and assertive engagement by the international community to increase its involvement. The international community has pledged billions of dollars in resources for Iraq that it has not yet delivered. Just as importantly, however, we need the international community to have a presence in Iraq, working with the Iraqi government, mediating disputes between sectarian parties, establishing greater ties with Iraq's economy, and supporting the development of civil society.

Finally, this plan would require engaging Iraq's neighbors to play a constructive role in giving Iraq a chance to succeed. This means pledging not to interfere in Iraq's affairs. It also means securing borders, training Iraqi security forces, and welcoming Iraq into regional institutions. I was encouraged that the Administration tentatively agreed to conduct a dialogue with Iran on its involvement in Iraq. I hope that this effort will move forward and that similar efforts will engage other Gulf States.

These are the elements of a responsible exit strategy. This is the type of leadership that the President owes our troops and the American people. After more than three years, the loss of more than 2,500 American troops' lives, and \$400 billion, this is the type of leadership that is long overdue.

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